

Extended Interview with Chris Ahearn

Chris Ahearn is the Commander of the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force. He has served under the attorney general for almost two years now, but he has been a police officer for more than 30 years.

Question: Will you start off by telling me about the ICAC Task Force, first what it stands for, and then what you do as a unit.

Chris Ahearn: The Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force focuses on protecting children within our geographic area, which is Utah, Idaho and Montana. Our investigations are broken up into several areas, we do online enticement, which is investigators in chat rooms, we do file to file share network systems, where people are producing, manufacturing, distributing child pornography. We also do reactive cases that are generated from local police departments, concerned citizens, and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. We also have a presence in the internet safety presentation arena where we have full time people as well as other members of affiliate task forces going out and educating the public about dangers presented by the internet.

Q: Why is it important that children are protected on the internet?

Chris Ahearn: Well, unfortunately there are a great many people that are interested in having sexual contact with children, and this is the medium that people are currently using to contact children, to reinforce their feelings about, their sexual feelings toward children, and are able to accomplish all different types of crimes with the internet as a basis or a component for committing those crimes.

Q: Is the problem really that big? Could you tell parents and viewers, what is the scope of this problem of online solicitation?

Chris Ahearn: Well just in on online solicitation, I think it's very significant. And even though the numbers may not be in the thousands when you look at the consequence of that crime, how many lives it ruins, how it impacts a victim as far as their ability to have a normalized life, I think it's extremely significant.

Q: Do parents realize the significance of it? Do parents really know what is going on on the internet; do they know what their kids are doing, if their children are protected?

Chris Ahearn: I don't think that they have a grasp of the totality of the areas of danger on the internet, I think that through ya know, media coverage, television shows, print stories, that most people are aware that chat rooms are a dangerous arena for minor children to be allowed to go into without being appropriately supervised, but there's a lot of other areas, the file to file network sharing systems, things where, ya know, children go to download music, or maybe Hollywood movies, these areas have become more and more perverse over the last few years and there's a lot of dangers there that I think parents are unaware of. Another area is in online gaming. There's a number of devices out there which allow people to compete in online games

and you have no idea of who the other people that are in that gaming site, and it has the potential to be a place where pedophiles would go in order to have contact with children that's through a very neutral system initially and it can evolve into something else.

Q: What steps do parents need to take with their teens, or in their life to try and make their home safe?

Chris Ahearn: I think the number one thing is that parents have to be vigilant about what their children are doing on the internet; ya know one of the areas that I didn't mention was the social networking sites which are immensely popular in the United States. And they're the kind of things that encourage people to post information about themselves, photographs of themselves, which puts that person in jeopardy.

Q: What about these sites can put a person in jeopardy? What happens sometimes between a teen and the people out there?

Chris Ahearn: Well, the dangers of posting personal information on your site, is with the available search engines on the internet, someone that's that is interested in learning where you live, or to make contact with you, or to stalk you, all of those things can be easily accomplished by someone that doesn't have to be a computer genius by any means, just someone that knows how to navigate around through internet search engines.

Q: So now we're talking a little bit about predators, can parents identify predators? Can anybody identify a predator? What is a predator like and we talked a little bit about the differences between how it used to be that maybe a predator would go wait in a park for a child, and it'd be scary, and late out at night, but then you mentioned, how now sometimes it's like they can almost come into the home through the internet, so will you just talk a little bit about predators, what they're like today.

Chris Ahearn: The predator in the year 2006 is operating in an arena, the internet, where that person feels much more anonymous than they did 20 or 30 years ago, where in order to target and make contact with a child, a potential victim, they have to engage in some rather risky behavior of going face to face with people or getting themselves into a position which allowed them to contact a number of children in order to pick out a potential victim, and then escalate the interaction with the child to a point where they could isolate them and engage in sexual activity with the child. Now on the internet they have a number of ways, ya know in chat rooms, they can just instant message someone, start talking to them, they could be very aggressive, they could take a rather patient approach and contact a person over months before, ya know, asking to meet them in person, ya know, some of the other things on the sites where children are posting a lot of information about themselves, if they're a preferential sex offender they can look for a specific body type, hair color, age that they prefer, and they sort of have a potpourri of who they can pick and chose from and then hopefully engage in some behaviors that will get them what they ultimately want.

Q: So why are teens falling for this? And what type of teen would fall for this? And why do teens love to communicate over the internet?

Chris Ahearn: Well I think it's something that they have grown up with, it may seem very natural to them, where someone from my generation, ya know, it's face to face talking contact is how you enlarge a circle of friends or get to meet new people. There are a number of things that the child can manipulate, how many teenagers at some point in time want to portray themselves as perhaps older than they actually are? This is an area where they can do that and they can portray themselves to be however they want to portray themselves. They may have a natural curiosity about sex. They may want to be able to do things, engage in activities, go places that a parent wouldn't allow them to, but through someone that they meet on the internet, because of their hidden agenda initially, they may offer opportunities to that child as far as going places, doing things that they wouldn't normally be able to do, and I think that those things are attractive to children. Not all children, but some children, and probably most children at some point in time.

Q: What teens are most at risk, what factors can parents look for in their teen, one like already there, but what about the other risk factors, that parents can say, "oh this is strange behavior that I see, maybe my child is in contact with a predator. So first, who's susceptible, and then what are the signs.

Chris Ahearn: Well I think that basically all children are susceptible to some type of manipulation, because I think it's pretty normal for a child to feel at some point in time during adolescence, alienated, to feel like they're at odds with their parents, or with teachers or authority figures in general, and they may be doing a little bit of rebellious acting out, a lot of time I think that they're looking for attention from people, and predators definitely will give the child the attention that they want, they also might want to hoist themselves into a role of being a mentor or a teacher about adult life for these children.

Q: What can parents do to help the AG's office, so you won't have to go about capturing predators alone? How can parents help the AG's office?

Chris Ahearn: Well, I think that parents can help in the whole picture of internet safety by being aware of what their children are doing on the internet. What sites are they visiting? Are they posting profiles of themselves? What is the content of that profile? Who are the people that they're interacting with, are they interacting with total strangers that they have no idea who they are, or are they interacting with a handful of friends from school, or maybe cousins that live out of state? Knowing what their child is doing is extremely important. I think another thing to be looking at from the parents' perspective is how much time the children are spending on the internet. Do they have the internet shut down, so that at 10 or 11 o'clock at night there's no access to that. We've had circumstances where we've investigated cases where kids are pretending to go to sleep at a normal time, the parents go to bed, the kids are back up on the internet for two, three, four hours at night. That would definitely be a warning sign that parents should look for. Another one that they might want to be considering is, is the child very adamant about getting on the internet at a certain time of day? Before they leave for school, the moment they get home from school, ya know is this a circumstance where a pedophile is trying to work their way into that child's life, dominate their life and wanting an accounting of where the child is all the time.

Q: Can the AG's office do this alone? Can they try to solve the problem by alone, why or why not?

Chris Ahearn: No, this isn't a situation where we can arrest ourselves out of the thing, there's not a finite number of internet stalkers, predators out there, and this has been a combined effort from a number of law enforcement agencies throughout the state, and affiliate task forces that have been formed in other areas of the state. The prevention aspect is what we would really like to see so that we don't have the circumstances where there has been very debilitating circumstances occur to people, and it effects family, and not just the victim themselves.

Q: What can parents do if they find or think that their child is in a situation where they have been solicited online? Where can they turn, and what would the process be like?

Chris Ahearn: If parents suspect that their child has been the target of undesirable solicitation, they can contact the ICAC task force at the attorney general's office, or their local police department, or any of the affiliate task forces within the state of Utah. At that time we'll take information and try to determine the source of that contact, and depending on circumstances, perhaps interview some people and determine if a crime has taken place.

Q: And parents that has happened to, have they been extremely surprised that this has happened to their child? What's generally their reaction, or their emotion?

Chris Ahearn: I think that most parents are totally unaware that their child has been solicited by someone, or their child is even in some type of an internet relationship with someone. These aren't the kinds of things that the children know that this isn't going to have approval from the parents, so sometimes they will try to hide that contact that they've been having with other people. So yes, it does come as a surprise.

Q: Has anything surprised you about doing the job here at the AG's office and what has surprised you about your job?

Chris Ahearn: I think the most surprising factor after having been involved with the ICAC task force for 18 months, is how many people are out there willing and interested in having sexual relationships with children. I'm not a novice police officer, I've done this for over thirty years, I was aware that there were people out there that had this interest, but the number of people has absolutely astounded me.

Q: Generally are most teens smart about this? Do lots of teens go into chat rooms? Are there lots of teens that are making themselves susceptible maybe in chat rooms?

Chris Ahearn: I believe that a lot of teens are making themselves susceptible, if you look at the primary social network site, they have over a hundred million subscribers, I think just that fact alone, even though people may have been told to be careful about information, they feel that all of their friends are doing this, there's millions and millions of people across the country are doing this, how dangerous can it be?

Q: Why don't you tell me about the grooming techniques.

Chris Ahearn: Grooming techniques that adults often employ while trying to forge a relationship with a minor, they can include things like just being an active listener to the child, sympathizing with anything that is of concern for the child, they'll pay attention, they will feign interests in music, books, activities that the child engages in in order to form some type of a bond with the child. They may go so far as to buy gifts for the child, sometimes try to introduce them into what are adult activities, it could be something like allowing them to drive a car, procuring alcohol or drugs for them and they might from there move on to exposure to pornography to try to normalize the types of behavior that they wish to engage in, and ya know pitch it from the point of view, well, this is a natural consequence of a relationship with adults or it may even be child pornography where there's lots of people that engage in this behavior, adults and children, and try to normalize their view of the world and activities that they want to engage in.